



Speech and Freedom In eighteenth-century France, most writers chose their words carefully. There were no guarantees of freedom of speech. The wrong comment about the monarch or his court could land a French citizen in the Bastille (bas TEEL), a prison for those who dared to displease their government.

But threats of prison did not silence the voices of the Enlightenment. In earlier years, scientists and philosophers such as Newton, Descartes, Hobbes, and Locke had opened eyes and minds. Like them, the eighteenth-century thinkers had powerful ideas. They would find a way to be heard.

The Baron

Charles de Secondat was born a noble and had a grand title, Baron de Montesquieu (mohn tes KYOO). He inherited wealth and a government position. He did not, however, spend his life idly enjoying high society. Instead, Baron de Montesquieu became one of the most important thinkers of the eighteenth century.

When it came to politics, the baron knew what he was talking about. He had traveled around Europe and watched government at work in Italy and England. He'd read widely about ancient and medieval times and about Chinese and Native American cultures.

In the spirit of the Enlightenment, Montesquieu observed, studied, and reasoned. Then he drew this conclusion: France was in big trouble. Montesquieu saw most of the people suffering poverty and injustice. A strict social order enforced by the monarch and clergy allowed no chance for change.

Yes, Montesquieu was a wise man. He was wise enough to know that if he openly criticized the French government or the Church, he could be thrown in prison. So he wrote in secret. Like others you've read about, Montesquieu did much

of his work in Holland. In 1721 he published *The Persian Letters*.

As far as readers knew, the authors were Usbek and Rica, two travelers from Persia. The book was a collection of their letters home. The clever, humorous Persians were pure fiction, but readers recognized their criticisms of the French ruling class as absolutely true to life.

On the King and His Court

In one of his first letters home, Usbek explained that he and Rica had left their quiet lives to search for wisdom. "Our purpose," Usbek wrote, "is to educate ourselves about the customs and social arrangements in the West."

Remember, as Persian citizens, Usbek and Rica had nothing to fear from the French government.

They could speak freely where Montesquieu could not.

The Persian Letters was a hit! Readers laughed out loud. They also recognized some harsh truths when Rica reported on the king of France. Why, the clever monarch could make people

who had always used coins to buy and sell goods believe that paper was money! "This king is a great magician," Rica declared, explaining that when the monarch ran low on money to support his wars, all he had to do was have some printed! Presto! More money! If making money were that simple, everyone would be rich.

vocabulary

clergy people who are priests, ministers, or other religious leaders

Montesquieu on Liberty:
"... it is necessary that government be set up so that one man need not be afraid of another."

In another letter, Usbek spoke his mind about the French court. He described the life of a court nobleman trying to “conceal the fact that he has nothing to do by looking busy. . . .”

Montesquieu's Pen Strikes Again

It did not take long for fans to figure out that the real author of *The Persian Letters* was none other than the Baron de Montesquieu. He soon published again, this time using his own name. In *The Spirit of Laws*, Montesquieu based his writings on what he'd learned about the governments of the world. He praised the British for limiting the power of the monarch and protecting the rights of the people.

What is the best way to protect liberty? In *The Spirit of Laws*, Montesquieu put forward an important

idea. He suggested that a country must limit the power of its ruler and, in fact, of any one branch of government. This could best be done, he explained, with a “separation of powers.”

Montesquieu pictured a government in which the monarch held the executive power, a parliament made the laws, and courts enforced justice. He believed that each branch of government could check the power of the other two. Montesquieu's thoughts on checks and balances would one day become part of the United States Constitution. You can read more about this in the next lesson.

At about the same time that Montesquieu suggested dividing government powers, he also fiercely attacked slavery. He wrote that enslaving a person because of color was not a reasonable act. It was no more logical than enslaving someone because of “a long or short face.” In *The Spirit of Laws*, Montesquieu described slavery as “the most shocking violation of nature.”

The baron did not suggest extreme social changes. He did not call for rebellion or democracy. Rather he sought peaceful, modest reforms that would give people happier lives. He pictured a wise, enlightened monarch who listened to the people and whose power was held in check by a parliament and courts of justice.

The Prisoner

Now let's go behind the walls of the Bastille. Once a military fortress protecting the city of Paris, the Bastille had become a royal prison. It is just four years before Montesquieu published *The Persian Letters*. A young man, François Marie Arouet (ah roo AY), is locked in the Bastille. What is his crime? He has written verses making fun of the French government! For 11 months the young author continues his writing behind the stone walls of the

As a nobleman, Montesquieu could have lived a life of ease, unconcerned about people less fortunate than he was.

Bastille. Now he uses the **pseudonym** Voltaire (vohl TAIR).

Like other Enlightenment thinkers, Voltaire examined society and then launched a battle to improve it. His weapon was his wit. Voltaire targeted greedy officials, lazy nobles, and evil institutions. He hated slavery and religious prejudices. Voltaire used humor and sarcasm to point out social wrongs and to demand change. His remarks made the ruling classes seem foolish. The French government had largely ignored Montesquieu's criticisms, accepting them as simple teasing. After all, Montesquieu was one of them—a noble himself. But Voltaire was a commoner. His comments would not be allowed!

Voltaire was not out of the Bastille for long before his sharp wit landed him in trouble again. This time he insulted a powerful young nobleman. (Some say he challenged the fellow to a duel.) The incident left Voltaire with two choices. He could go back to jail, or he could flee to England.

Voltaire took the likely choice. He lived in England for three years. As he studied the philosophy of John Locke and the science of Isaac Newton, he became more certain than ever that his homeland faced big problems. He felt that England, with its **limited monarchy**, had the answers.

In a letter home to a friend, Voltaire wrote, "In this country [England] it is possible to use one's mind freely and nobly, without fear or cringing."

Voltaire had strong feelings about freedom of expression. "My trade," he said, "is to say what I think." He refused to be silenced.

vocabulary

pseudonym a "pen name," that is, a name used by an author in place of his or her real name

limited monarchy government in which a ruler shares his or her power with another governing body such as Parliament



Life in the Bastille may not have been hard for Voltaire, but not being able to publish his work was.

As soon as Voltaire returned to Paris, he published again. He praised England for its science and philosophy. It was a country, he said, that protected the rights of its people.

Daring publishers secretly printed Voltaire's newest works. When copies appeared in Paris, the order went out: "Arrest Voltaire! Burn his books!" But the book-burnings backfired. As soon as his books were forbidden, more people clamored to read them.

Thoughts from Ferney

Voltaire was not interested in spending any more time behind the walls of the Bastille. He again fled Paris. He bought an estate at Ferney, near the border of France and Switzerland. There he lived out his life, but not in silence.

Voltaire continued to write books, plays, pamphlets, and letters. From the country estate

came the sharp-tongued voice of reason speaking out against **censorship**, ignorance, and injustice.

A steady stream of visitors kept Voltaire from being lonely at Ferney. In fact, his many guests nicknamed him

“the innkeeper of Europe.” There must have been some lively discussions at Ferney. Voltaire never failed to stand up against oppression and injustice. An argument with a visitor may have prompted him to declare these famous lines: “I do not agree with a word that you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it!”

Voices of Change

Voltaire and Montesquieu set examples for other free-thinkers to follow. In the coffee houses and parlors of Paris, people were meeting and talking. The French thinkers became known as *philosophes*, (fee law ZAWFS), which means “lovers of wisdom.” The *philosophes* discussed and debated ways to achieve a fairer society. They expressed their ideas in books and pamphlets.

vocabulary

censorship the act of removing or holding back anything thought not right for people to see or hear

Voltaire was among the group of *philosophes* who wrote and published a great *Encyclopedia*. In over 30 volumes, they summed up the major ideas and discoveries of the Enlightenment.

At first these new ideas about freedom, rights, and liberty, and calls for reform, remained within the upper and middle classes. Despite the efforts of Montesquieu and Voltaire, the Enlightenment had not reached the masses of people. Most people in France still lived with poverty and ignorance.

Enlightenment Reaches the People

Not until the late 1700s did the message of the Enlightenment begin to reach into the Paris slums. It seeped from the city into rural villages where peasants still toiled each day and paid high taxes—just as they always had.

At last, the masses began to question the way things were. They began to see the possibility of a better life in a fairer world. They imagined a society that protected rights—one in which people could speak their minds. The royal censors had failed. The message was out, and there was no turning back.

The philosophes often met over dinner or in coffeehouses to discuss the problems of the day.





Ideas Across the Ocean “I hold that a little rebellion now and then is a good thing, and as necessary in the political world as storms in the physical”—Thomas Jefferson

You may have read those words before. Even if you have not, you probably recognize the name of the man who wrote them. You have learned about the American Revolution and the founders of the new United States. When American colonists became unhappy under the heavy hand of Great Britain's rule, they defended their liberty and launched a revolution. The fact is that many of the revolutionaries' ideas—and some of the words they used to declare independence—echoed England's greatest thinkers. The spirit of the Enlightenment had crossed the ocean.

Thomas Jefferson: An Enlightened Man

What should citizens do if their government is taking away their liberty? According to the Enlightenment thinker John Locke, it is the duty of those citizens to protest. They must demand change. What if the government does not listen to their demands? Then they must replace that government with a new one.

In 1776, American colonists decided they could no longer tolerate Great Britain's rule. They were tired of paying taxes while having no voice in government. The colonists had asked for change. They had demonstrated and protested without results. Finally, they took extreme action. The colonists proclaimed their freedom from Great Britain in the Declaration of Independence.



Great Britain's 13 colonies put Enlightenment ideas to work.

Do you remember who wrote that famous declaration? A committee of patriots had selected 33-year-old Thomas Jefferson to draft the colonists' formal demands for freedom. “I will do as well as I can,” Jefferson promised the committee. He wrote a moving attack against tyranny and a call for freedom that people still quote today.

Jefferson was well suited for the task. With private tutors as a child and college and law degrees, he had had the best education available. He'd made the most of his schooling—reading and studying for long hours each day.

Jefferson seems to have been interested in everything. He examined fossil bones and Native American mounds. He collected books for his library. He observed life and figured out how to make it better. Jefferson invented the first storm windows and a clock that could tell the day of the week as well as the hour. He was a truly enlightened thinker. It is not by chance that many parts of the Declaration of Independence echo the ideas of the European Enlightenment.

Jefferson began the Declaration of Independence by stating that “all men” are entitled to certain natural rights, including “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” Now, where have you read that before? Like Jefferson, you have studied the ideas of the English philosopher John Locke. In the seventeenth century, Locke expressed his belief that



Franklin (left) and Jefferson (right), two men very much influenced by the philosophers of the Enlightenment, worked together on the Declaration of Independence.

people are born with natural rights to “life, liberty, and property.” Jefferson’s eighteenth-century version of the idea suits America, a new world where even people of little means—those with little property—have a right to seek happiness.

Here’s another idea Locke and Jefferson shared. In the late 1600s, Locke declared that a government has a duty to preserve its citizens’ natural rights. If their rights are not protected, citizens should change or replace the government. Compare Locke’s opinion with this passage from the Declaration of Independence:

... to secure these rights [life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness], governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive to these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government. . . .

Both Locke and Jefferson described a government that gets its power from the people. That bold, defiant idea—the idea, as Jefferson said, that “governments . . . deriv[e] their just powers from the consent of the governed”—led to the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the American Revolution of 1776. Thomas Jefferson clearly admired the Enlightenment ideas of John Locke and found inspiration in his writings.

Benjamin Franklin: The American Philosopher

When you read about Voltaire, you learned that the French word *philosophe* means a “lover of wisdom.” Benjamin Franklin became known as an American *philosophe*. Franklin, who lived into his eighties, spent much of his long life seeking knowledge. He read widely. He studied, experimented, invented things, and traveled. Franklin exchanged letters with European thinkers and scientists, including some of the *philosophes* who worked on the French *Encyclopedia*.

Franklin did more than study what others had to offer. He added to the world's store of knowledge himself. He was a witty author who wrote these gems of wisdom: *Three may keep a secret, if two of them are dead.* Or *Fish and visitors smell after three days.* Franklin included such memorable sayings in his *Poor Richard's Almanack*. The series of publications—a cross between an encyclopedia and a journal—aimed at helping people improve themselves. Franklin also helped Jefferson write the Declaration of Independence.

As a scientist, the enlightened Franklin experimented with electricity and invented the lightning rod. He also invented bifocal glasses. As a politician and **diplomat**, he traveled to France, seeking support for America's revolution. Franklin was a hit in Paris. He was a welcome addition to intellectual discussions.

An Enlightened Government

You have learned earlier how the delegates to America's Constitutional Convention wrote a code of laws for the new independent nation. Among these delegates was James Madison of Virginia, whose work at the convention earned him the nickname "father of the Constitution."

vocabulary

diplomat a person in government whose work is dealing with governments of other nations; also, someone who is very good at dealing with others

Like the European thinkers of the Enlightenment, Madison studied and observed. When faced with the job of drafting

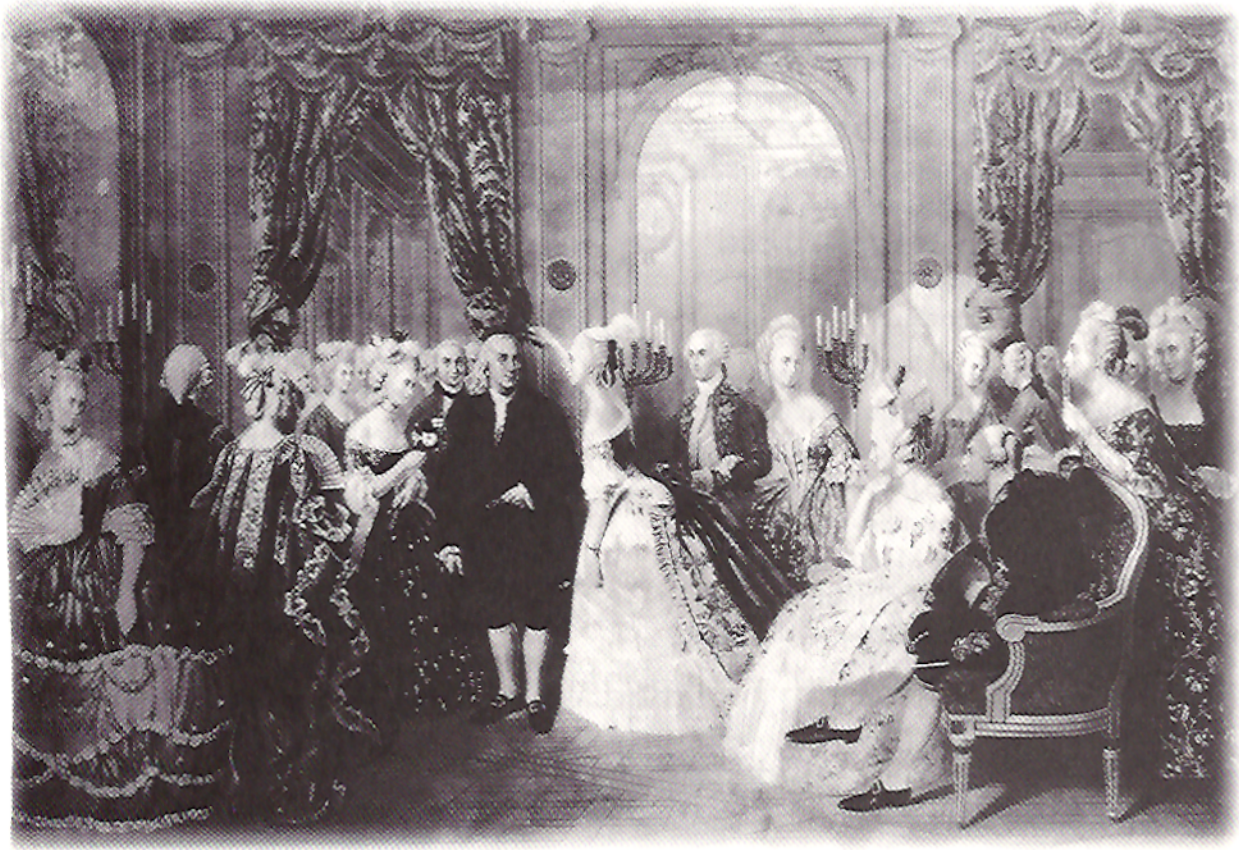
a constitution, he threw himself into the task with true Enlightenment spirit.

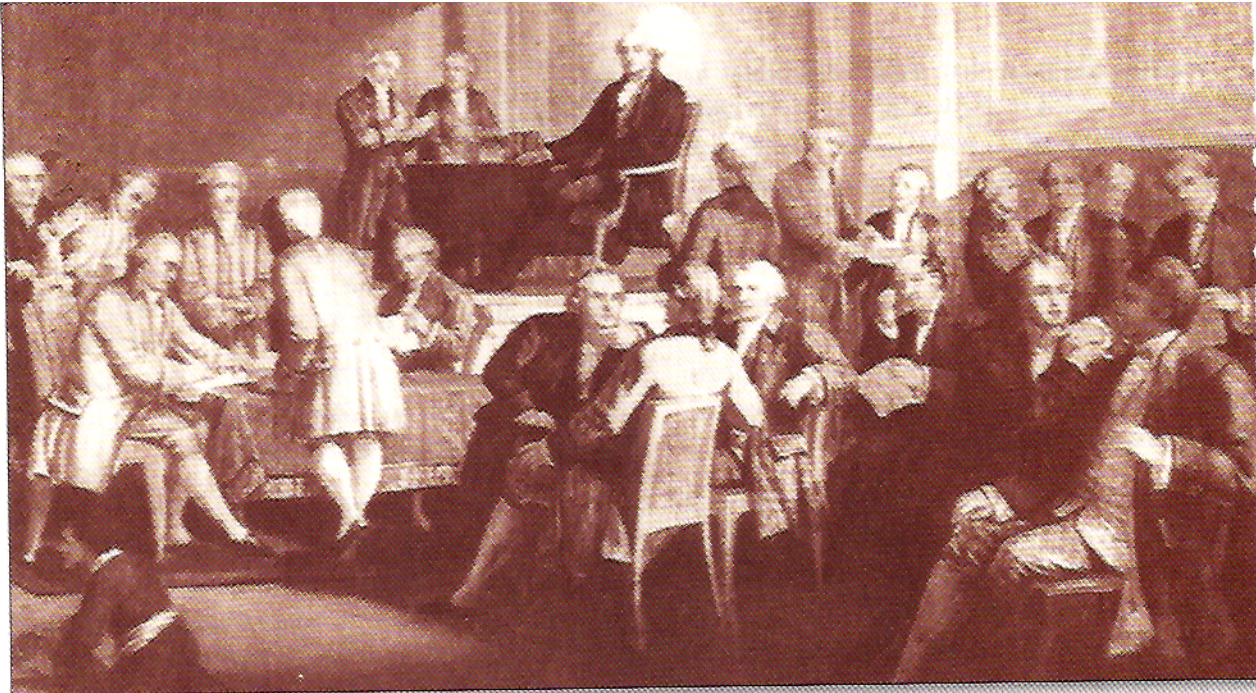
Picture a hot night in 1787. Although it's nearly midnight, James Madison is awake. In an upstairs chamber of a Philadelphia rooming house, he spends long hours reading and taking notes by candlelight. He lists problems that must be solved. He studies governments of other times and other lands and considers their solutions.

James Madison, like Jefferson, studied and admired the works of John Locke. He enthusiastically agreed with the notion that officials can only govern with the consent of the people.

James Madison came to each session of the Constitutional Convention inspired by the writings

A lady of the French court honors Benjamin Franklin by crowning him with a victor's wreath.





The delegates at the Constitutional Convention signed a document that continues to enlighten the lives of many people, not only in our country but around the world as well.

of Europe's Enlightenment thinkers. The delegates created a document that, according to its own words, aimed to "promote the general welfare." To this day, the United States Constitution protects the rights of American citizens.

Merci, Monsieur Montesquieu

Merci is the French word for "thanks." The young United States definitely owed a thank-you to Baron de Montesquieu for his ideas on government. Remember, Montesquieu had suggested that to protect individual freedoms, a country must limit the power of its ruler. In fact, every branch of government must answer to the other branches. The power of the executive, be it a president or a king, must be balanced by the lawmakers of the legislative branch and the courts of the judicial branch.

If you take a look at the United States Constitution, you should recognize some of Montesquieu's ideas in action. A system of checks and balances keeps any one person or any one arm of government from gaining too much power. The Constitution also uses Montesquieu's ideas of a balanced government by dividing powers between the national government and the states.

Action!

In 1789 the United States Constitution became the law of the land. It outlined a government that gave more power to its people than any other in the world. You have learned that these were not purely American ideas. The European Enlightenment had encouraged dreams of a freer society and a government based on reason. It had sparked the idea of a government created by the people for the purpose of serving the people. The Constitution of the new United States put those ideas into action.

There was more change to come! The Enlightenment ideals that inspired the American colonists would soon spark action in Europe. People in France were ready to demand the personal liberties their great thinkers had been suggesting. They'd heard the ideas of Voltaire and Montesquieu and had watched ideas become reality in America. The *Encyclopedia* had spread the message throughout Europe, across the Atlantic Ocean, and back again. The call for freedom was about to move out of France's coffee houses and bookstores and onto the streets and battlefields. The French Revolution was about to begin.